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WHITE PAPER

The traits - thought patterns, mindset and habits - of people who constantly develop and perform at the top of their game in their field of activity, e.g. work, sports, etc.

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Introduction: What makes distinctive performers different?

Scientific research on human performance in domains where one can objectively measure actual performance, e.g. sports, music, certain areas of health care, shows that we can define three different performance profiles: the distinctive performer, the ambitious performer, and the average performer. The average performer has a development and performance curve that very soon into his or her experience in the domain flattens out as well as eventually shifts into a downward slope, i.e. performance gradually deteriorates. The ambitious performer has a much steeper development and performance curve, but as with the average performer, the curve flattens out and eventually tends to show a downward slope. The distinctive performer has a development and performance curve that follows the same curve as the ambitious performer early into the experience in the domain, but the curve continues to be steep for a much longer time than the ambitious performer. Furthermore, the distinctive performer's curve tends to be maintained on a very high level for most of his or her experience in the domain.

The most useful analysis is of course to compare the ambitious performer and the distinctive performer, since both performance profiles seem to be displaying the same conviction and ambition to truly master the domain in which they operate.

Contrary to popular belief, research shows that talent, amount of training, quality of coaches, or support from the environment, are not the differentiating factors between these two performance profiles. Furthermore, when asked about what lies behind their development and performance, the distinctive performers' most common answer is "hard work, great support and the excitement the domain brings me". Unfortunately, this is the exact answer that the ambitious performer also gives. So in a sense one could conclude that the distinctive performers themselves do not really know what their "secrets" are, which also is echoed in how they tend to talk about themselves as just being like anyone else, i.e. an ordinary person.

On an overall level research suggests that what sets them apart is "deliberate practice", which in turn suggests two things: 1) They most likely spend more mental energy in a more focused way to reflect and think about their development and performance, and 2) they most likely have a specific and ever-present mindset which makes them view every situation as an opportunity to a) become better at what they, in terms of their sought after ability to perform, are not sufficiently good at, and b) increase the complexity and capability in what they are already really good at.

This document is a first attempt to describe what likely traits (conscious or unconscious thought patterns, behaviors, habits, values) that could consistently fuel the distinctive performers' mindset and actual practices in his or her domain. The purpose to embark on this journey to find these traits is to eventually bring them to other people - not with the goal that everybody should become expert performers and authorities in their domains, but for the fundamental reasons that these traits bring health, development and performance.

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Examples of traits
In the mind of the Expert Performer

1.
“Boring” is not in my vocabulary when I perform in my domain

I know that when I view a task as boring my mind starts to work slower as well as tend to wander and think of other things I rather be doing, which means that I will perform the task even worse. Hence, this will make the task extraordinarily boring! Over time I have learnt that there are virtually no boring tasks, only boring ways to think about tasks. This way of thinking is now part of my intrinsic thought pattern so I automatically - and with no additional effort – manage to identify all exciting aspects of the tasks I am facing. I realize that this aspect of my developed character is one of my core assets.
2.
Attention to details and good “hygiene” keeps me alert

Things like keeping promises, being on time, and to always make sure to deliver what is agreed upon, are important principles for me. It creates a natural tension and attention when I operate in my domain. So even if a particular day don’t contain any significant challenges or decisive moments, these principles make every day an opportunity to stretch and feel good about myself and my capabilities as well as my contribution to people around me.
3.
My only fear of failure is the fear of ever becoming complacent or indifferent

I know that the fear of failure is one of the strongest feelings we have as humans. And it is this particular and universal feeling that keeps people from living life to the full, to take enough risks, and to constantly challenge themselves and their development. I have the feeling too and it is most likely as strong within me as in other people. But I have managed to turn it into something useful and focused. For me the darkest and most frightening feeling of failure is to ever become complacent or indifferent toward myself, my domain, and the people around me.

Having felt what it is to live life to the full, which is the feeling I get from the way I do things, makes feelings like complacency, indifference, fear of failure, or lack of inspiration, excitement, and curiosity, my biggest and almost only fear. For me these types of feelings signal a life almost not worth living, so I am always ready to go to war on these feelings whenever they try to enter my mind and body.
4.
I get my never-ending energy from my everyday development and learning

The feeling that I am progressing as an individual every day, and by that becoming a little bit less incomplete, is the highest level of satisfaction and energy booster a human being can experience. This all-embracing feeling helps me to overcome any set-backs in terms of actual results. Rather, it inspires me to understand the root causes behind any potential set-back and by that develop even more.

I kind of think that this feeling is created within us by purposeful design since developing and learning more about oneself, one’s domain and environment, is instrumental for the survival of our species.



5.
My everyday development goals are always very pragmatic and concrete, as well as balanced between process (knowledge, learning) and outcome (results)

To me there is no magic behind my learning and development, although the feeling inside when I do is certainly magical. And addictive. If I am having a meeting today (all meetings are important to me) I visualize the optimal outcome (results) of that particular meeting. Then I think about my meeting performance in general as well as my performance in this type of meeting specifically, e.g. previous meetings with the same meeting attendees. From that mental exercise I easily derive a couple of very concrete process (knowledge, learning) goals, e.g. how I open the meeting, how I drive a certain perspective, how I interact with a specific meeting attendee, or whatever is important.

This combination of concrete process goals as well as visualized outcome goals gives me instant feedback in the meeting on my progress, which in turn makes me more present and flexible, hence increases my actual performance. It is in other words, tangible development made easy.

6.
I combine the law of least effort with stretched desired outcomes

Contrary to many popular beliefs about people like me, the secret behind my development and performance is not that I have an ability to spend all my energy when I perform. Energy is important, but it is not the “thing”. The thing is to spend the energy wisely and in a focused way. To facilitate this I actually draw on one of the inherent habits of human beings, i.e. to always pursue our goals and tasks with the least effort possible. But what makes it truly powerful is that I combine this with a stretched and demanding mindset in terms of how I visualize the desired outcome.

The “stretch” is important to build excitement and for me to go “all in” in the planning and execution of the task. But it is extraordinarily important to turn the “law of least” effort into something powerful instead of being a barrier for performance and development - which it automatically is without a stretched desired outcome. In my world the law of least effort brings wonders since it forces me to really learn and figure out how each task is constructed in terms of sub tasks and sub elements, since the output of the law of least effort is to define the process goals (the 2-3 most important things I think is decisive to develop during the execution of the task in order to reach the desired outcome). If we take the example with having a meeting, if having meetings is one of my development and performance areas, the law of least effort will force me to over time learn more about all elements and tasks involved in having a meeting. It will force me to learn about all elements of meeting preparation, structuring a meeting, managing the discussions in a meeting, and all elements in terms of following up on a meeting.

If I don't constantly learn more about all tasks and elements of having a meeting I will never be able to visualize ever stretched desired outcomes or identify relevant process goals. Needless to say - but perhaps surprising to many - the law of least effort is also a key driver behind my ability to innovate



and to re-invent myself and my domain.

7.

I have developed an ability to instantly judge what is strategically important here and now

I know that the domain in which I am active is an ocean of development opportunities and that each little task has multiple aspects to it in terms of perfecting its execution. On the other hand I know that no development will occur if I spread myself too thin and address too many development opportunities at the same time. To manage this complexity, and by that create a sense of ownership over my development and performance, I mentally sort the different opportunities into three buckets: “always right”, “game changers” and “not important now”.

The “always right” bucket contains all development opportunities that, given my tenure and current development level, will help increase my performance in a tangible way.

The “game changers” are opportunities for me to potentially innovate and introduce a new distinctive approach to a task in my domain (or introduce a new task).

The “not important now” bucket is very important since it gives me the necessary peace of mind to not focus on all opportunities out there. It could be opportunities in performance areas where I am already performing sufficiently well, or opportunities that will be unnecessarily challenging without more progress on the “always right” opportunities.

8.

Whenever I feel negative stress over too many tasks to do, I do the opposite of what most people do...

For me negative stress is just a ghost in my mind, and it occurs when I have not thought enough about how the smartest and most developing way is to execute each of the tasks on my priority list. In other words, my mind has been sloppy and has itself generated this feeling of stress. Because when I don't think enough in terms of the tasks I am supposed to do, my mind tends to automatically overcomplicate the challenge to execute each of them. And when I then look at all things to do in combination, I get overwhelmed, hence feel negative stress. When most other people would automatically look to shorten the lists of tasks, I go in the complete opposite direction. Why? Because the key thing now is to get my mind to start to work. And I mean *really* work. I could never accept how people solve this situation most of the time, i.e. to reduce the number of tasks, because then I would invite the habit of not thinking enough, into my world. And if you do it once, you easily embark on a behavioral path that will make true learning and performance virtually impossible.

My way to start and fuel my mind is always to increase the level of challenge in this situation. Either I can add even more tasks to my priority list within the given time frame, shorten the deadlines for all the tasks on my priority list, or simply raise the desired outcomes of all the tasks on the priority list. Oh, I almost forgot, there is a fourth “trick”: I actively force myself not to



consciously think about the tasks until the deadline for delivery is dangerously close! (I don't recommend this last approach to anyone new in his or her domain, since the necessary skills to operate in the domain might not be in place).

Anyway, what happens when I apply these approaches is that my mind is forced to think *clearly* and *solution-oriented* about the most critical aspects of each task, which makes the mind - with the reliable support of the law of least effort – able to automatically peel each task like an onion in terms of what must be done, why and how. Very soon into this thought process the feeling of being overwhelmed is transformed into a feeling of positive attention and conviction.

It is perhaps like the feeling I would assume a Detective has when trying to solve a crime or Scientist has when trying to figure out the underlying pattern in a big chunk of data. In other words, the thought process in itself is exciting and addictive.

Do I manage to execute the tasks using these approaches? Yes! And even if not all the tasks are delivered according to the desired outcome or within the visualized time frame, I have learnt a lot about each task as well as about myself, which in turn has elevated me into a higher level of development.

To conclude: My experience has taught me that there are no truly complicated tasks, only complicated ways to think about them. And complicated thinking is the result of too little thinking, which in turn is the key driver behind negative stress.

9.
*I have trust in myself,
but I would not call
it self-confidence*

I fundamentally trust myself in terms of my commitment to develop and perform as an individual. Furthermore, I trust that my thought pattern and habits will be more right than wrong whatever situation I will face.

But I would never say that I am self-confident in terms of reaching the desired outcomes of my tasks and activities. Rather, I view self-confidence as a potential enemy of great outcomes, since it tends to make you sloppy and less attentive to how you do things (process).

And when I look around me I see a lot of self-confident people that over time tend to make more and more mistakes in how they do things, mainly because they think too little about process and are blinded by their self-confidence in reaching their desired outcomes.

I think that my developed character (thoughts, values and habits) has taught me that no matter how well I have performed previously; there are always new and unexplored aspects and factors in reaching a specific outcome. Nothing becomes ever under my perfect control.

Perhaps this attitude or mindset is why people tend to view me as modest and unassuming, even though my actual results tend often to blow their mind.



10.
*I very seldom
get distracted, and why
should I?*

I have learnt that distraction is something that is mainly driven by laziness, since it most often means that you tend to focus too much on things you can't influence. And the reason why so many people tend to focus on their zone of Concern rather than on their zone of Influence, is that it allows them to avoid addressing the stuff they can directly influence and change – themselves! In my world I can truly only influence a handful of things: myself, my way of thinking and behaving (toward myself and toward my environment), and my choices. It does not matter how slick I become in influencing others, at the end of the day the ultimate decision to do either this or that lies within the person I try to influence. It is beyond my control.

In line with this I don't expect anyone to be accountable for my actual performance, development, thinking, behaviors, or choices, and I really don't care or get distracted if someone is trying to do bad things to me, or lets me down on promises or support. There is little I can do about it, and I am certainly not going to add to this person's endgame by spending endless of hours thinking or talking about what the person did or did not do to me. I can of course get hurt and suffer emotionally, but since I am not the guilty one why should I bother more than necessary?

This focus on what I can influence has over time turned into an inner strength that guides me whenever other people attempt to influence me to think about stuff I can't influence. It feels like I have a quiet place inside where I can rest and reach complete emotional stillness; a place that helps me to re-commit to myself, to who I am, and what I am becoming, and the reasons why. Perhaps this inner place helps me to act and think in ways that make people perceive me as a person with high ethical standards and no interest in playing politics.

11.
*I need a coach, but for
different reasons than most
people*

I don't need a coach to motivate me or teach me how to think in order to constantly develop. These are my personal responsibilities and core skills. The role of my coach is to be a "second opinion" or a reliable "mirror" in terms of my development and performance. And since I am in constant development and operate around the previously mentioned development buckets "Always right", "Game changers" and "Not important now", it goes without saying that I might shift coach at times and/or have a set of coaches at times. Furthermore, depending on my needs I might use coaches that have no knowledge about my domain. In other words, my approach in using coaches has no boundaries as long as it serves my development and performance. In contrast, when I observe people around me they tend to look for a coach that they can relate to and be comfortable with – sometimes I kind of think that they are looking for a friend instead of a coach.

For me I don't even have to like or have "chemistry" with my coaches as long



as I can trust their capabilities in “mirroring” or give sound second opinions. For me a coach is a tool. Sometimes I need to use this tool, sometimes I don’t.

12.
I view other people as great assets as well as sources of both positive and negative inspiration

Let’s revisit a fact we all know to be true: the most effective way to learn a new task is to copy how another person is performing the task. When I face a new task I observe and talk to someone that knows how to perform the task. I ask questions about what he or she thinks is difficult versus easy in performing the task, and also if there are any aspects of the task which are completely decisive, as well as aspects which might be less important. Then I start to perform the task with the result that I instantly have created a first version or method for how to execute the task. After just a few times executing the task my first method develops, and very soon I realize that I have at least 2-3 different “methods” in my arsenal. The process is not so different from the process in which human cells divide. This common sense approach in learning new tasks, i.e. observe and (sometimes) talk to a person who knows how to perform the task, gets me up to speed very quickly in performing any new task.

Perhaps this simple copying method is why people often can’t believe that it is the first time I perform a new task, since it looks like I have done it before. I use the same copying method when I observe people who perform tasks I perform much better than me. This helps me to constantly raise the bar and formulate stretched desired outcomes. Furthermore, I also actively observe people who perform the same tasks poorly. This helps me to quickly understand which aspects of performing a task to avoid in general and/or in certain circumstances. In other words, my learning and development is driven both by doing and observing. When I observe people around me I sometimes get both surprised and sad. My surprise stems from the fact that very few people tend to actively learn from each other, instead they either try to hide their incompleteness in performing their tasks, or engage in constant conflicts around which specific ways to perform the tasks are the “best”. The sadness stems from the fact that I have gradually realized that many grown-up people have forgotten how it is to learn something new. Instead they actively avoid new learning by inventing silly excuses and engaging in a multitude of destructive behaviors. I don’t know, perhaps all this is due to our culture where grown-ups are expected to always have control and the adequate skills and knowledge. Many grown-ups certainly don’t live by my personal motto: “I am born incomplete, and I will pass away incomplete. The meaning of life is to try to become a little less incomplete day by day”. And how can you achieve that without learning?

13.
I have developed into a fundamentally generous and helpful person

There are many reason why being helpful comes natural to me. First of all, I am grateful for all the gifts I have gotten from living in my domain. And gratefulness is the key driver behind a constant need to “give back”, to reach out, and to be observant on opportunities where I can help out – and I don’t expect anything back because I have already gotten so much from the domain.



Secondly, by helping others I also make sure that the domain keeps developing - hence will offer me a never-ending flow of development opportunities. Thirdly, I help out since I want people to be able to experience what I experience because it brings personal health, development and performance. And lastly, I want to be remembered as a person that gave rather than took from other people and to our mutual domain.

14.
*I like to constantly
mix it up*

A popular claim about one of the secrets behind people like me is that we thrive on maintaining solid routines. This is completely true! I am meticulous about my routines since they enable me perform reliably as well as force me to develop. But that in itself means that all routines will over time become more or less obsolete; When I develop and elevate my performance I need to change all or part of my routines to make them facilitate the next level (the only “routines” I don’t change are my basic thought patterns). And I use the same rigor in how I develop my routines as in how I develop myself. I think exhaustively about which areas to establish and develop routines on, and I have no limits in terms of how I can design my routines. If I find that a certain time during the day suits me in terms of doing x, y or z, then I make a routine out of that – until that certain time of day no longer seems to bring the benefits anymore. If I start to notice that in morning when I come to my domain my mindset more often seems less energetic or even unfocused, then I don’t visit a shrink – I change what I do every morning, from when I wake up until I enter my domain (breakfast habits, my behaviors at my house, the sequence in how I do things in the morning, travel path and means of travel from my house to my domain, etc.).

Realize it – the sky is the limit in terms of how you can shift your routines so they support optimal conditions for development and performance. The more you experiment with your routines, the better.

15.
*I suffer from
deliberate mood swings*

People often believe that I am cool and controlled. To a great extent that is true, but I live a very rich emotional life. To actively manage emotions and temperament is a very important tool for me in order to energize me and keep the momentum in my pursuit. I have learnt that different emotions generate different views on what and how I do; Hence they offer additional insights and knowledge. The same goes for temperament. Being more laid back when performing gives certain insights and knowledge while performing. Being aggressive gives other insights and knowledge. And now we come to the main point: in essence all performance situations are unique since they contain so many variables that influence the outcome, and adjusting, not only how you do and think, but also how you feel (emotions) and “attack” (temperament) the specific situation also decides your outcome as well as your development in the specific situation.

This insight has made me actively experiment with emotions and temperaments. In social life this capability and willingness to experiment means that some people like me are viewed as hilarious impersonators or people with great capabilities to entertain friends and family. To pull practical jokes is another area where people like me often act as instigators. To



colleagues in the beginning, people like me can be viewed as hard to understand since we tend to oscillate in our temperaments and in views, i.e. we can be very objective as well as extremely subjective at times, show extreme activity as well as extreme relaxation at times, or be painfully serious as well as extremely loose and easy going at times. Again, all this is stemming from the same desire: to develop and to perform.

16.
*My magic memory and
how I manage it*

It does not take a rocket scientist to understand that my memory management in terms of learning is highly effective; The constant usage of desired outcomes in combination with process goals gives me an accelerated ability to remember the right things in every situation – what happened, why, what are the implications for me going forward?

Compared to people not operating like this, their memory has no specific area to focus on in a performance situation, so they either don't remember anything (besides the bad things they experienced) or a just few small things in many areas. And how could they remember anything more useful or use their memory in a more useful way? They are not looking to learn anything!

So needless to say, my learning during a typical day is most likely equal to what most other people pick up in a month.

Another important aspect of my memory management is how I manage my emotional memory, which is much stronger than the “cognitive” memory. I sort my emotional memories into two buckets. “Positive memories” and “Negative memories”.

Positive memories serves as a fuel reserve that I actively draw on I critical performance situations. In these situations I recall positive memories of similar situations where the outcome was extraordinarily exciting and mind-blowing. It fills my body with energy and a posture that resembles the situation(s) I recall – so in a sense I am re-living the memory, which gives me additional fuel and stamina, as well as a positive filter through which I evaluate my performance in the situation.

Bad memories are equally important for me to have control over. If I am facing a performance situation that resembles a previous situation where the outcome and experience was bad, I need to up front understand that, so I can change important aspects of the upcoming situation, i.e. I need to break the patterns inherent in the bad situation.

This might lead to that I prepare myself very differently and that I don't repeat certain procedures before, during and after the specific performance situation. In a way you can say that I need to change how I mentally and behaviorally approach the situation so I can make room for a positive memory to energize me and give me extra strength (and at the same time make the negative memory powerless).



17.
*No dream or fantasy
is crazy enough*

I am very hesitant about setting concrete long-term goals, especially goals that have a sort of end-game sentiment, i.e. a sort of final goal. Furthermore, the problem with goals in general, is that I often only feel emptiness when I reach them. The gift and reward was the whole journey I had to take in order to reach the goal. Another potential problem, which I can observe in people around me, is that goals very often tend to make people view the present as only one step among many to reach their goal as well as tend to make them automatically view the present as less valuable than the future, i.e. the moment when they reach their goals. In other words, goals can often make you be less focused on all the fantastic opportunities and experiences that here and now, i.e. today, can offer.

I much rather prefer to dream or fantasize, and the crazier and more impossible the dream or fantasy is, the better. And I don't have only one dream or fantasy, I have many. One dream or fantasy can be about the future development of my domain, and how important the domain will become in people's life and society. I can dream or fantasize about myself being acknowledged for a major contribution to the development of the domain. And I certainly dream about that people I love will view me as a good, fun and helpful person to know and be with.

18.
*What my endgame is?
To keep experiencing
what I am experiencing*

There are a lot of claims out there in terms of what inspires and drives people like me; claims such as the need to become famous, make a lot of money, or other extrinsic type of motivational factors. I can agree that perhaps in the very beginning of my career in this domain the initial motivation was inspired by this type of extrinsic motivation. Why? For the obvious reason that I was younger and had been shaped by the values in our society and culture, where a lot of what is regarded as desirable has to do with stuff like fame, money and status. But ever since I experienced the inner feeling of development, progress and genuine accomplishment, those things have become my real motivation and inspiration. Of course, a certain type of extrinsic motivation exists even for me; it can be – as mentioned in the paragraph above – in the shape of which prominent people in my domain that will acknowledge me as a great contributor to the domain, or observing the thrill or happiness I bring to people when they watch me perform. Or, depending on which domain I am active in, it could be the value and benefits I bring to other people through my accomplishments. And, of course, the people close to me and people who have meant something for me, e.g. my parents, are great sources of inspiration in my endeavor. I mean, even though I might have unusual thinking and

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behavioral habits, I am still an ordinary human being who seeks the approval and appreciation of other human beings.

Other claims have to do with huge ambitions, hairy visions and extraordinary planning skills. I agree that there are elements of ambition, vision and planning in what and how I do things. But are these managed differently by me? I don't know. Why don't you try to do things how I do it and then you can tell me...